

For many, this time of year reminds us of what is truly important in our lives – the health of our friends, the well-being of our neighbors and the love of all those we hold dear. It is a special time of year, and it is encouraging to hear stories of the tremendous goodwill exhibited by our community. Unfortunately, the holiday season also brings increased risk for families both in terms of fire and theft, but it is also one of the deadliest times of year on America's highways, as the number of drunk drivers rises at a particularly disturbing rate.

That is why I am joining with national, state and local highway safety and law enforcement officials to remind everyone this holiday season to always designate a sober driver before each holiday party or event involving alcohol.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), on average from 2001 to 2005 (the last year for which complete data is available), about 40 percent of all fatalities during the Christmas and New Year holiday periods have occurred in crashes where at least one of the involved drivers was alcohol-impaired, as compared to about 28 percent of all fatalities during the rest of December. This year, NHTSA estimates that about 430 fatalities could potentially occur in motor vehicle traffic crashes during the Christmas and New Year Holiday periods due to the involvement of an impaired driver.

Locally, we have seen the impact that drinking and driving can have. According to a report released recently by the Washington Regional Alcohol Program, the number of people who died in alcohol-related crashes in the Washington area last year rose more than 31 percent.

These statistics show why it is necessary during the holiday season to deploy all of our resources to protect citizens from the dangers of drunk driving. And it is why, according to the NHTSA, every December nearly 10,000 law enforcement agencies join forces with hundreds of traffic safety organizations in all 50 States to conduct intensified anti-drunken driving campaigns for the holiday season.

Once such effort is the Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) Tie One On For Safety holiday ribbon campaign. The "Tie One On For Safety" campaign was initiated in 1986. Previously known as the "Project Red Ribbon" campaign, the purpose of the initiative is to increase public awareness of the consequences of drinking and driving during the holidays. Tie One On For Safety is the largest campaign coordinated by MADD and simply requests holiday drivers to tie

a red MADD ribbon to their vehicle in a visible location. Displaying a ribbon on their vehicle in this way is a demonstration of the motorist's pledge to drive in a mature manner – safe, sober, and with a seat-belt securely fastened; and it reminds others to do the same.

Programs that encourage using designated drivers are also key to the prevention effort. Combined with highly visible law enforcement, a Designated Driver program gives people the information they need to make informed choices and seek alternatives to driving while impaired. A person who gets behind the wheel after consuming alcohol is not only endangering the lives of him/herself as well as any passengers, but also the lives of everyone else on the road at the time. But there is hope: impaired driving is 100 percent PREVENTABLE.

Remembering to designate a sober driver before the party begins is just one of several simple steps to help avoid a tragic crash or an arrest for impaired driving during the holiday season.

Other reminders include: If impaired, call a taxi, use mass transit if available, or call a sober friend or family member to come and get you; or, just stay where you are and sleep it off until you are sober. If you are hosting a party this holiday season, remind your guests to always plan ahead to designate a sober driver, always offer alcohol-free beverages during the event, and make sure all of your guests leave with a sober driver. Finally, always remember that Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk. Take the keys and never let a friend leave your sight if you think they are about to drive while impaired.

Whether you are trying to stop someone else from getting behind the wheel, or making a decision yourself about whether or not to drink and drive, there is always an alternative. Though it is often difficult and awkward to reason with someone who has been drinking, the alternative -- the loss of a friend or loved one -- is much worse.

I am grateful to MADD and the Century Council with whom I worked with last year to launch the Cops in Shops program in Prince George's County, which partners undercover police officers with bar owners to prevent serving alcohol to underage and intoxicated individuals.

Driving impaired or riding with someone who is impaired is simply not worth the risk. Have a safe and happy holiday season.

You Drink & Drive. You Lose.

Wednesday, 19 December 2007 19:00
